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Multi-State Group Reports Range-Wide Population Estimate For Lesser Prairie Chicken

Results Could Affect Endangered Listing Consideration

AUSTIN – Through a multi-state collaborative effort, the first statistically-valid, range-wide population estimate for the lesser prairie chicken is an estimated 37,170 birds, according to a [new report](#). The survey results could be significant as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prepares its proposed rule expected in November about whether to list the species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

“After the worst single year drought in recorded history, we still have an estimated 37,000 birds on the ground range-wide, and that tells us that opportunities to recover this species are better than what many people expected,” said Sean Kyle, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department wildlife diversity biologist in Lubbock.

Aerial surveys this spring detected several previously unknown breeding areas, known as leks, despite severe drought conditions across the region last year. They also discovered leks in Kansas beyond what was thought to be the northern limit of the historic range of the species.

Lesser prairie chicken numbers have been largely increasing in Kansas for the last 15 years, while populations have declined in parts of the southern portion of the range, including Texas. Biologists believe this expansion may represent a northward shift in the population of the species caused by climatic conditions associated with changing precipitation patterns.

“Historically, we saw habitat conditions like we are observing now in the 1930s, and we thought the species went extinct,” said Bill Van Pelt, grassland coordinator in Phoenix for the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies’ (WAFWA) Grassland Initiative.

“However, with habitat conservation programs being implemented through various Farm Bill programs and Candidate Conservation Agreements under the Endangered Species Act, we are seeing lesser prairie chickens maintaining themselves and even expanding into new areas in some parts of their range,” said Van Pelt. “This definitely boosts our confidence in coming up with a plan to maintain this species.”

The WAFWA Grassland Initiative collaborated with the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group, which is composed of biologists from state fish and wildlife departments within the range of the species, the Bureau of Land Management, and West Ecosystems, Inc. of Laramie, Wyoming, to conduct a large-scale, helicopter-based survey of lesser prairie chicken leks across all five states this spring.

The survey results will be the baseline for a range-wide lesser prairie chicken management plan currently being developed by the five state wildlife agencies in collaboration with the WAFWA Grassland Initiative. This plan is expected to be completed by March 2013, and could influence the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) decision on whether or not to designate the lesser prairie chicken as a federally threatened or endangered species. The lesser prairie chicken has been considered a candidate under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1998, and the Service expects to release a proposed rule on the status of the bird under the ESA in November.

To help restore habitat for the bird, state and federal experts developed a tool called Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) to work with private landowners and managers in the geographic range of the lesser prairie-chicken. This voluntary program was designed to help reverse declining bird numbers by promoting habitat conservation and restoration through practices such as prescribed grazing, upland wildlife habitat management, brush management, prescribed burning, range planting and restoration and management of rare or declining habitats. The program also provides assurances to landowners that, beyond what is detailed in the CCAA agreement, they will not be required to meet any new regulations if the bird is listed under the Endangered Species Act. To date, close to 315,000 acres of Texas ranch land have enrolled in CCAAs.

Texas agriculture producers may sign up to manage and restore high-priority habitats for the lesser prairie chicken within eligible Texas counties, including: Ochiltree, Lipscomb, Roberts, Hemphill, Gray, Wheeler, Donley, Deaf Smith, Bailey, Lamb, Cochran, Hockley, Yoakum, Terry, Andrews, and Gaines.

Landowners can get details regarding the lesser prairie-chicken CCAA by contacting TPWD Biologist Jeff Bonner at 806-665-3494 or Manuel DeLeon at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Zone office in Lubbock at (806) 791-0581. Or visit the [NRCS website](#).

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On the Net:

http://www.wafwa.org/html/aerial_surveys.shtml

<http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/programs>